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INSINCERITY IN THE PULPIT.

IN the ecclesiastical order of Congregationalists, and in that of some other religious communions, one of the older ministers gives to a newly-ordained minister what in ecclesiastical language is called a "charge," as a part of the solemnity of his ordination.

One of the seniors in the Congregational body, when called to this duty at an ordination, used to say in substance this, to the "candidate": "Do not try to use influence in the ministry till you have it to use; and, when you have it, do not be afraid to use it."

The injunction affects an epigrammatic form, but it involves more wisdom than all epigrams do. It will be found that those sneers or flings upon clergymen, most frequently uttered, charge them either with an impertinent audacity or with a sneaking cowardice. The criticism attacks to-day a conceited little fool who, in twenty minutes, has undertaken to reconcile free-will and foreknowledge; or to correct the House of Bishops as to the rubric; or to set right for the village some feud that has been smoldering since the days of Peter Stuyvesant. To-morrow it attacks some easy and comfortable old gentleman, who rolls good-naturedly up the broad aisle of the church to take his accustomed place in the pulpit, and, from a manuscript, which to the ungodly looks a little yellow, reads well-rounded expressions, which assure all the people that the speculations of a few young sciolists of to-day are too absurd to require refutation or indeed attention, and that all men will find in the Assembly's Catechism, the Thirty-nine Articles, or whatever other standard the case may require, all of truth that is necessary or desirable for this world or the world to come. To the student of human nature, what is interesting is, to observe that the young fool of forty years ago very often ripens into the old fool of to-day.

Of the young fool, and of the old fool both, the mental processes

may be suggested, and they are worthy consideration. Of the young man's audacity, however, we have but little to say in this paper; nothing, but as it connects itself with other men's reticency. Yet it is important to observe that four years in college, followed by three years in a theological school, do not specially fit a man for ten thousand of the most difficult cares of the ministry. They teach him a great deal else, but they do not of themselves make him a practical man. Many a good fellow, therefore, starts in ministerial life with many a bad blunder. He makes the usual college blunder of overrating the value of the particular facts he has learned in his seven years. With this, the other mistake belongs, by which he does not estimate highly enough the training or the information of those who have learned in other places, by other channels. What follows is that the "bumptiousness" of the beginning receives some well-deserved knocks as he goes on. And, by a natural process, which speaks well for human nature and the good sense of him who makes the experiment, he learns modesty and reticence, even by the results of his own conceit and audacity. In the palmy days when Margaret Fuller, Mr. Alcott, and Mr. Emerson, and the transcendental coterie around them, uttered their wisdom in "The Dial," once a quarter, a young minister going from Cambridge, on the eve of his first professional conflict with Satan, found himself enjoying the hospitality of a well-educated New-England family. He asked the opinion of his host on one of the last "Orphic utterances" of "The Dial," to be told that none of his new friends had ever heard of "The Dial." "Don't take 'The Dial!'" cried the inexperienced Timothy; "you must be barbarians." Now, this man had sense enough to see, as he grew older, how little sense he showed in such a maiden encounter, whether with Bereans or Lycaonians. Such a man, as he grows older, learns that there are, in religion, things which people know who have never sat at the feet of Dr. McCosh, or Dr. Alexander, or Professor Park, or Professor Peabody. After he has preached those terrible first sermons, which explain everything, which tell what is the basis of the power of faith, what is the place of mystery, what were the mistakes of Calvin and John Knox, and how it was that the Bible translators mistook in their Hebrew and their Greek, he begins to find that there are some things which he does not know himself. Nay, he begins to learn, even when he has not a book in his hand. He finds that the bed-ridden old man, whom he went to visit one day in a perfunctory fashion, knows some things of Life which are

not written in his philosophy. In a Sunday-evening call, he finds that that choice anecdote, which was the light of his morning sermon, was misquoted ; and that, in its more brilliant form, it was already familiar to those very people of "culture" whom he had thought to astonish. In a long drive with this merchant, whom he had thought a mere rule-of-thumb man, he finds that his own study of ethics has been but superficial drill, compared with the broad and deep philosophical investigations of his friend. Life, in short, teaches him the lesson of Life. He learns that the university did not teach everything. His sermons become in proportion more modest, more simple, more direct. But, in the utter failure of the first sixty of them, he has learned, very likely for life, his lesson of caution. And, after the first sixty have gone to their own place, the sermons which follow show how well he has learned it. By every mortified recollection of the fatuous folly of a boy's beginnings, is he tempted to tone down the statement which a man has a right to make. And, just in proportion as his first essays were audacious, do the habits of his manhood, even when he has a right to be bold, show traces of timidity.

He finds out also, if he did not know it before, that the pulpit is not specially the place for argument. The special business of the pulpit is to state what is. The preacher announces what he is sure of. As he does not go into the pulpit to wash his dirty linen, he does not go there to tell people what his doubts are. There are other opportunities for that. If he is a manly fellow—and, if he be not, he has no business in the pulpit—he can discuss these doubts at other times with those who will help him in the discussion. But, speaking in general, and admitting that there are exceptions to the statement, no man should use the pulpit for the proposing of enigmas, which he does not solve. Indeed, that is poor preaching which keeps a congregation on tenter-hooks, even for half an hour, while an enigma is proposed for which a solution comes at the end. The masters of preaching state the solution first. The pulpit announces truth. True, it may be the preacher's business to state opposing error. Then he states it fairly, and gives it its best show, that he may confute it the more thoroughly. But the real investigation of truth is to be pursued elsewhere. It is followed out in the study, or in personal discussion, or in the comparison of the best results of other investigators. It is only by a figure of speech that a preacher affects to carry along a body of hearers, made up of people of every different range of information and ability, into real study for the

first time, or the original investigation of a subject where they were in doubt when he began.

The success of all public address, indeed, comes from the conviction of the speaker. It is only in proportion as he believes what he says that he succeeds in making his audience believe it. If he is in doubt, he will not lead them. One of the affectations of our time leads public speakers the other way. But nobody cares much what they say. Nobody "minds." What a dreary business it is when the preacher before you halts to say: "Does not this statement approve itself as true? If not, for the love of truth, do not receive it! If, to-morrow morning, I find it is not truth to me, I will be the first to unsay what I have said, and to relieve you." All of us, in these modern days of mock sincerity, have heard this sort of apology for some half-hearted statement. But we have all taken care not to hear it oftener than was necessary. Nobody goes to church to hear a man tell what his doubts are. If he have no convictions, he need not stand in the pulpit at all.

So much reason has a man of conscience for refraining, in the pulpit, from bringing prominently forward questions which he is only learning to answer, and doubts which he has only begun to solve.

From the lesson of caution or modesty learned, perhaps, by the preacher from his own boyish follies—from the impossibility of proving in a popular address anything doubted or unknown before—and from the determination to announce nothing there of which the preacher is not sure, there grows up in all communions—nay, in different countries and religions—a certain reticency or timidity in the pulpit. This reticency reduces the sermon in popular esteem to a second or third stage in literature. It degrades the preacher in popular esteem far below the place of the true prophet, and even puts him below the position of a true priest, which always should be rated as lower than the position of a prophet. "I am afraid they think us insincere," said a clergyman of experience. "I think that if Tyndall or Huxley lectured in the Music Hall on one of our subjects—say on education, or on the relief of the poor, which every one would say were our subjects—I think that the audience of three thousand people there would believe that Tyndall or Huxley was telling the very best he knew, and telling it precisely as well as he could. I think the audience would believe in his sincerity. But if one of us ministers were to speak in the Music Hall on one of their subjects—on evolution, or the law of natural selection, or the crea-

tion of the world—I do not think that all that audience would trust us in the same way. I think many persons would doubt our sincerity, because we are clergymen. For we are constantly stating as truth so many things which we can not prove, that I think many persons have lost their confidence in our sincerity, and consider us as people who, in the interests of a cause, overstate, understate, or are in some other way indifferent to accuracy.”

We have assigned the causes which have led to a degradation so fatal to the pulpit. They account for it, perhaps, but they do not for a moment excuse it, or make it tolerable. Here are forty thousand speakers, or thereabout, calling together congregations once a week, at least, in this country alone, and addressing them on themes of the very highest importance. These speakers claim, and they obtain, the most respectful hearing. The immense enginery which assembles these congregations and the traditional respect which is the accumulated gift of centuries demand that these preachers shall tell the truth, absolute and simple, as they address the men and women before them. Nobody is asked to say anything, where he is in doubt. But it is asked—it ought to be demanded—that, where a man is certain, he shall say what he knows. Mr. Phillips Brooks, in his address to the Divinity School at Alexandria, has put the statement admirably. If preachers do not relieve their congregations from the strain upon faith in these days when faith is hard, “we are making ourselves liable to the Master’s rebuke of the Scribes and Pharisees : ‘They bind heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.’” * This is bad enough, and mean enough. For a minister to have his own private way of explaining the inconsistencies of the Pentateuch, of “getting over” the story of Jonah, of “accounting” for the disagreements of the gospels, while he warns his hearers against tampering with Scripture by private interpretation, and does not relieve their pains and difficulties by the elixir which has soothed his own—this is bad enough, mean enough. But, when his meanness disgraces his profession—when he makes men think of preaching as the science of concealment—when the very oracle of the Eternal Truth becomes the mouth-piece of commonplace, indecision, and insincerity, this is even worse. He damns, not only himself, which is of little consequence in the comparison, but he does all that such a

* The address is printed in the “Presbyterian Review” for March, 1879.

mean coward can do to degrade the system by which the gospel has been till now most widely proclaimed, and to which, till now, we had all said it owes its choicest victories.

Yet it has seemed to us that preachers whom we should be sorry indeed to charge with duplicity have, under our own observation, wrought terrible havoc in this way. For a long period, it may be, a clergyman respected, honored, and beloved, preaches to an attached congregation what in his soul he really thinks they need to bring them nearer to God. Then, after months and years of a tranquil and successful ministry of truth, it occurs to him that he has, perhaps, been negligent in preaching "the doctrines." It does not seem to occur to him to ask why he has been negligent. Why should the Holy Spirit, whom he has invoked on his knees for help in all those years, let the "doctrines" slip by? He supposes, however, that the time has come for a drastic dose of "the doctrines." The old dogmatic books come down from the dust. The old note-books of the seminary are consulted again. Pure and simple, bitter, sour, and hard, "the doctrines" are proclaimed in their severity. Now, if this man believe them in their severity, that is one thing. Let him do fit penance for neglecting them for these years which have seemed so useful. But if he hold the old standards only "as substance of doctrine," if in his own heart he have this palliation, or that interpretation, an allowance here and a concession there, this proclamation of doctrine pure and simple, unpalliated, and unrelieved, without the allowance and without the concession, is simply the running a muck among innocent parishioners by an insane devotee. He wounds, God only knows how many tender spirits of those whom he has taught to trust him and honor him! And he wounds them with poisoned arrows. He is not telling the truth. At the bottom of his heart he ought to know this. Does he say it is, on the whole, well for "the Church" to have this proclamation made in its naked simplicity? It is not well for the Church, if it is a lie. And a lie it is, if he have kept back part of what he knew or believed.

We have no wish to make general accusations in a matter where no man can inquire as to the condition of separate consciences. But it is not we, it is the common sense of the community, which is beginning to make the accusations which the pulpit must meet. The authority and degree of inspiration of the Bible present a question which interests everybody. Without appeal to the separate consciences of forty thousand preachers, we are quite safe in saying

that the greater part of them no longer hold the notion which the Protestant Church held two centuries ago. It will be safe to say this at the very least, that, of the American ministers who pretend to any theological training, the great majority now assent to the general principles of criticism which now govern the leading theological schools of all communions. Men may not go so far as Dean Stanley goes in details, but they do start from the same principle of interpretation. To take the instance Mr. Brooks cites, they do not believe that the world was made in six literal days. Or we should be safe in saying they do not believe that the sun literally stood still upon Gibeon ; or that Jonah lived three days and three nights in the stomach of a fish. We should be safe in saying that the majority of American preachers know and are fully convinced that there are inconsistencies between different parts of the Bible. They may account for these in different ways. The excuse may be as deliciously absurd as that of an eminent Hebraist, who said that the consonants only of the Hebrew text were inspired, but that the vowels were not inspired ! No matter, for our purpose now, how they explain the business to themselves. They explain it. They do not hold—as their fathers did hold two centuries ago—to the consistency, the veracity, or the authority of every part of the Bible.

Now, the general community knows this, or suspects it. When, therefore, the great body of preachers go on—as to us they seem to do—citing single texts as absolute authority, speaking of any text as, of course, “the Word of God,” if found in the Bible, they win for the pulpit the epithets of “cowardly,” “insincere,” and “infidel.” Unless they explain to others the view they hold themselves ; unless they proclaim from the pulpit what in their hearts they know, they degrade their office, and they do all they can to fling away the power which the pulpit seeks, and which, when a prophet of the Truth speaks from it, it commands. And the leaders of every communion where this caution shows itself must ask themselves whether here be not the reason why young men of pluck and character turn aside from the pulpit. The Archbishop of Canterbury, in his pathetic life of his son, appeals earnestly to the young men of England to come into the work which Craufurd Tait so distinguished. The men whom the Archbishop wants will not come if they think the pulpit is half-hearted, or that its utterances are reserved. Nor will any communion secure any preachers who are worth securing, unless it can weed out, to the fiber, every weed of irresolution or timidity.

The illustration of the authority of Scripture is a convenient one, because the issue is so simple. We follow it, therefore, so far as to ask gentlemen, who permit themselves to use in the pulpit common-places which the last century used as to the unity of the Bible, what they suppose the people before them are reading? Nobody is deceived in this business, if we can conceive the wretched thought that the pulpit wants to deceive. Let the preacher, who has dodged the hard questions on inspiration on Sunday, go into the bookstore on Monday and ask his friend the bookseller to tell him what books he has been selling in the last month. Let him find out there and at the public library what the more thoughtful and intelligent persons in the town are reading. Can it be that any preacher, with one ray of intelligence, supposes that only he and a few of his theological brethren have access to speculations and criticisms which are printed in popular editions, scattered everywhere, and so circulated that he who runs shall read?

"But how far shall we go?" This is the pathetic question of the timid preacher, whom we have described, frightened into caution by the echo of his own rashness as a boy. The answer needs no sphinx. The preacher is to go as far with his congregation as he has gone himself. He need not ask them to go where he is not sure. He need not, if he be anxious, set them on inquiry where he himself inquires. Because he doubts, he need not ask them to doubt. But, where he is sure, he is bound as a prophet of the God of truth to tell them what he is sure of. What he has found, he must share with them. What God has given him was not given him to keep, but that he might distribute it among others.

Few thoughtful American travelers pass from town to town in England, and hear, week by week, the sermons preached in the decorous pulpits of the Establishment, without saying, "These gentlemen say to these people what they would not dare say at their own dinner-tables to their guests." The position of a minister in the Establishment gives a habit, if not a right, of speaking from above to those below. It is a pity to confess it, but the sermons preached in England often give the hearer a feeling that it is supposed only common people, or poor people, or ignorant people listen to sermons. A witty traveler once described the standard of the sermons in the Establishment "to be twenty minutes in length and no depth at all." But there is something more than the lack of breadth and depth, when the preacher treats his hearer as being on a different level of intelligence from himself, and hands down to him certain

working-clothes of religion which, in his "condition of life," he will find useful, though they are not needed by his betters.

The danger for America is that the pulpit shall be degraded, even to a lower level, if the preachers do not bring and give the very best they have, know, and believe, to the people. "Preach as if you were preaching to archangels." That was an ejaculation of the late Mr. Weiss, and his obedience to his own injunction gave to his own sermons the life and the power which quicken to this day every hearer of them. Men may make other limitations to the doctrine of human equality. But we shall all concede that one man has as good a right to the truth as another. And it ought to go without saying, that truth is truth, the same in one place as another—in one pulpit as another. There is no such thing as Dutch algebra distinguished from English algebra, nor is there any such thing as Presbyterian truth as distinguished from Universalist truth. Perhaps the machinery of written creeds deceives men. Perhaps a preacher comforts himself by saying that if a man comes into a Presbyterian church it is to hear the Presbyterian doctrine, and that the hearer takes it for granted, therefore, that that pulpit will not go further than the Presbyterian standard. This will not do. It may excuse me, in conversation, from refraining to allude to the starvation in Libby Prison, that I am talking to a reconstructed rebel officer. But when I am in the pulpit it is not etiquette which is at issue. I am there to say what *is*, and I must not stop short. The whole tangle of authoritative creeds is, at the best, embarrassing. They lead a man, from their nature, to try to continue in a belief which he once thought he had. They give a fossil form to what should be pliant, elastic, and alive. But, no matter what they do elsewhere, when the preacher enters the pulpit he is free or he is nothing. He is there to say what he believes, not what he wishes to believe, or thinks it would be well to believe.

It seems, now, as if the country at large were beginning to doubt whether the pulpit does make such utterance. In one quarter and another, and this in no dainty terms, it is called half-hearted. Preachers are called cowards and insincere. This charge seems rather hard, it is true, when it falls upon the liberal pulpit. For the preachers in that pulpit to be abused on one side for their own audacity, for publishing discussions which should be still regarded as tentative, and yet to be set down on the other side as sharing the timidity of their more orthodox brethren, seems a little unjust. But their shoulders are broad enough to bear this weight

also. It is for the organs of orthodoxy to consider how far they can bear to diminish the power of the pulpit. They ought to know whether its dogmatism have any such power as to make it safe to risk the contempt of those who hear. They ought to ask themselves whether men now come to church with the eagerness with which men once came, or whether the word spoken from the pulpit now commands the sort of assent it once commanded. Nor can they satisfy themselves by citing a few exceptional instances. The question is not whether an eloquent orator here, a careful and accurate metaphysician there, a prudent and wise ethical philosopher here, and a poet there, can still bring together thousands of people in church, when they speak from the pulpit. The question is, "Does the American people, on the whole, believe that the preachers say all they know?" This is a very grave question. In proportion as orthodoxy shirks it, or as it fails to amend its ways, in that proportion will the American pulpit, so far as orthodoxy controls it, cease to be the power which it once was, and which it wishes to be.

This is a matter where young men must use power as soon as they have it to use. It is as true now as it was in Harvey's day, that men who have passed five-and-forty years must not be expected to lead reforms. Well if they follow bravely. It is to the younger preachers of the Evangelical Churches—who are old enough to have ridden themselves of boyish audacity, and who are young enough to have the courage of their convictions—that we look with confidence for the courage and decision which shall avert the most serious danger of the American pulpit. For, though we have spoken of the insincerity of the pulpit—using the word which best expresses the attitude of mind into which preachers are lured unconsciously—the world's criticism will be less tender in its choice of words. If the pulpit does not tell the truth and the whole truth, the world will charge the pulpit with infidelity.

E. E. HALE.